

SOCIAL WORK AND THE HAREDI COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL: FROM REJECTION TO ACCEPTANCE AS REFLECTED IN THE NARRATIVE OF A HAREDI SOCIAL WORKER

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The Haredi community, about 8% of Israel's Jewish population, is characterized by strict religious observance and relative isolation from modern influences. The Haredi community in recent decades has experienced major changes such as a rapid population growth, an increase in poverty levels and an increase in the severity and magnitude of social problems. Under these conditions, the traditional voluntary treatment of social problems inside the community is no longer effective. Yet, in previous years, relations between the Haredi community and the state welfare system were characterized by suspicion, hostility and lack of cooperation.

The state welfare professional community has recognized the need to intervene in a culturally sensitive way and has developed unique models of social work intervention for this community. In this paper we discuss these models using the narrative of Sarah, a Haredi social worker who symbolizes the changes that Israeli social work has recently experienced.

"Do not turn aside from the decision that they announce to you, either to the right or to the left." (Deuteronomy 17: 11)

"Commentators explain that you have to do all that the Sages tell you, even if they say 'your right is left and your left is right'..." (Rashi)

This verse reflects an essential component of Haredi values and emphasizes the total authority given to the Torah¹, religious-scholars (rabbis) and the unquestionable adherence to their rulings in all aspects of daily living. The centrality of this component of the Haredi way of living will be noted throughout this paper.

Haredi Jews are strict observers of Jewish laws and customs and view daily Torah study as the pillar of true Jewish life. Haredi Judaism developed in the modern era as an isolationist reaction against the ways in which the freedoms of modernity pushed Jews away from the observance of Jewish law. The Haredi community has strict boundaries and rules that differentiate between "them" and

"us" in order to protect its members from what is conceived to be the corrupting influences of modern life, such as sexual permissiveness and individualistic and liberal ideologies (Heilman & Friedman, 1991). Television, movies, secular newspapers, and the internet are generally forbidden. Crossing the boundaries may have negative implications, mainly regarding social status. Thus, a family with television will have its children expelled from school.

Modesty is also central to Haredi values, resulting in the separation between men and women in different aspects of life: the educational system, public events and recently also in the public transportation system². Men do not acquire secular education and are encouraged to dedicate their life to studying Torah. Consequently, over 60% of the men do not work and poverty levels are high.

The relationship between the mainstream secular society in Israel and the Haredi community is strained due to controversy regarding the degree to which the Haredi community participates in, and contributes to,

Israeli society in several areas. These areas include military service, the workforce and the educational system. Controversy about the educational system arises because, although Haredi schools are financed by governmental funds, only limited secular studies are part of Haredi curricula.

Haredi Jews tend to deny the existence of social problems because obeying strict religious laws is perceived to regulate normative behavior and prevent "deviant" ones, such as incest, child abuse, and alcoholism. Once social problems are acknowledged, seeking help from "outsiders" is viewed as a threat to religious values, because interventions that are offered to Haredi families by non-Haredi social workers may conflict with their values and life style. For example, the Haredi community would not accept the placement of a Haredi child in a non-religious foster family (Hoffman, Guy & Feldman, 2004). Solutions to social problems have relied on resources within the Haredi community, such as rabbis and volunteers. Referrals to government agencies (such as social service departments and mental health clinics) have been made only as a last resort (Dahan, 2004; Goodman & Witztum, 2002).

Traditionally, the welfare system's efforts to help the Haredi community cope with its increasing social problems have been met with suspicion, fear and lack of co-operation. Haredi newspapers often portrayed social workers as "child-snatchers" who seek to place Haredi children out of their homes in order to force them to abandon their beliefs and observant way of living.

Despite these defensive tendencies, the Haredi sector is part of the general society and is constantly negotiating the social boundaries within their communities and between it and the "outer" world (El-Or, 1994). As a result, we witness changes and areas of co-operation with the secular world. In this paper we will describe the changes that occurred in the relationship between the social work profession and the Haredi community, through the narrative of Sarah, a Haredi woman who became a social worker.

Prologue: Jerusalem, 1995

On a cold winter night, Sarah, a 27 year old Haredi mother of four, had a moment to reflect on what was waiting for her after putting her children to bed. In just an hour they would come and desperately need help. They were sent to her by the community's rabbi who had asked Sarah and her husband David, to start an organization to help families in need.

Sarah was thinking of the first two people who would come that night: a couple in their 30s who have been married for more than a decade and were parents to seven children. They were caught in a turbulent relationship, yet after years of conflict were still motivated to save their marriage. While Sarah was fixing her head covering³, she thought of the young mother who was coming later and was not well. The rabbi had advised Sarah to make a plan in which the young mother would be supervised in her home 24/7 by members of her extended family so she would not 'hurt herself again', as just a few weeks ago she had tried to do the unthinkable. Sarah tried to remember what was written in the letter from the hospital; it said something about a "borderline personality," but what did it mean? Sarah did not know, but it was clear to her that the young mother was in distress.

Sarah is neither a social worker nor a psychologist, and has no secular education. However, motivated by a deep belief in G-d, she and her husband began an organization to voluntarily help their fellow community members in difficult times.

I listened to their problems, supported them and tried to find creative solutions for their difficulties. At times, my listening

relieved their burdens, but often I did not understand the complexity of the situations they were dealing with, and did not know what to do. At times, I felt helpless and overwhelmed. There was no possibility to get help from social services because the social workers were mostly secular and did not understand our values. I also knew that solutions that were acceptable to the community did not exist. My husband often assisted families to oppose the recommendations given by social workers and find alternatives regarding out of home placements of the families' children.

After a few years, the local social service department in Sarah's hometown recognized its limited success with Haredi families and decided to join Sarah and David's efforts. They approached Sarah's organization and offered to subsidize and professional support a new center for families dealing with domestic violence. The new center would operate under joint management: a social worker from the Social Services and Sarah. The rabbi granted his approval and Sarah and David successfully negotiated how the center would operate. However, Sarah and David could not agree with Social Services about the new center's name.

Social Services did not understand that it was impossible to use the term "domestic violence" in the center's name, or in any other context related to the center. No one would come to a center that has a sign saying it is a center for victims of domestic violence. Avoiding stigma, the name had to be neutral, and eventually we settled for the "Center for Family Advancement."

This joint venture of the Social Service department and Sarah, a woman from inside the community without formal education, was one of the first efforts to develop a culturally

sensitive intervention model to be used in the Haredi community. For Sarah this was the first opportunity to interact directly with a social worker. She soon realized that a professional approach was different from the way she had worked with families over the years. The recognition that Haredi families needed professional help, and that in the current situation Social Services was not providing adequate assistance to the Haredi community, caused her to pursue a bachelor's degree in social work.

I realized that in order to help families to deal better with their difficulties I should study social work and become a social worker. I asked our rabbi for permission⁴ and he gave me his blessing. I was very excited about all that I was about to learn, I still remembered the term "borderline personality" and wanted to know what it meant and what implications it had. Yet I was also anxious about being exposed to study materials that might conflict with my religious beliefs. I remember that we learned about Darwinism in psychology courses, and the first time I heard the name Darwin I had a physical reaction and started to tremble and to sweat...I asked my rabbi what to do and he told me to continue with my studies but not to believe in it....

There are two levels of religious guidance given by rabbis: an individual level and a community level. Decisions suitable for the individual are not always suitable for the community. The permission Sarah received from her rabbi to study for an academic degree at a secular university was at the individual level. Therefore, even though Sarah received her rabbi's blessing, she could not tell her friends or even her children, out of fear that she and her family would be labeled as "too modern", a label that would affect their social status in the community.

I could not tell anyone, only my husband, and I remember being scared that my children would see the mail I received from the university and would ask me about it, or worse, that they would tell their friends and teachers...I used to run to the mailbox and hide those letters..."

During the period described in this paper, the Haredi community was coping with changes that were caused by a rapid population growth due to high birth rates, and the joining of tens of thousands Ba'ale teshuva⁵ to the community over the years.

As the community grew, there were more and more cases of dysfunctional families, and yet community resources were lacking. At the same time, the Haredi educational system for boys was dealing with problems of its own. For boys, Torah learning makes up the entire study program without alternatives. Youth who did not want, or were unable to study Torah all day, dropped out of the Haredi school system. They did not attend secular Israeli schools. Thus they were left without any secular education or vocational skills and, in addition, were often rejected by their families. These "drop outs" were often found wandering the streets engaged in negative behaviors.

This new phenomena of wandering youth, caused the majority of the Haredi community⁶ to understand that professional help, provided by local social service departments, was needed in order to provide care and solutions for youth who did not fit into the world of Torah studies.

All this led the welfare system to the understanding that changes in the approach towards the Haredi community had to take place, and that ways to work with the community in a culturally sensitive way were needed. Culturally sensitive approaches are also recognized in other places around the world, reflected in guidelines for culturally competent social work (NASW, 2001).

In order to contribute to mutual trust, new ways of working with the Haredi population emerged in the Israeli welfare system, using the following principles in the development of

culturally sensitive social work for the Haredi community⁷:

Rabbinical approval and involvement. Significant changes in this regard have taken place in the child welfare system. Israeli social work practice applies a group decision-making model to the routine work of child protection practitioners, through decision committees. These committees provide a forum for inter-organizational and multi-disciplinary teams of all relevant participants to meet in order to exchange information, evaluate current and future risk, explore various treatment options, discuss each of them and develop a detailed treatment plan – all regarding children who are at risk of abuse or neglect (Dolev, et al., 2001). Leading rabbis serve as permanent members of multi-disciplinary teams in several social service departments (mainly in Haredi cities) (Miller et al, 2009). Additional efforts are also made to gain rabbinical approval and involvement in a variety of other interventions and programs, such as a shelter for battered women and a drug rehabilitation clinic (Palant, 2004).

Employment policies. When possible, social service agencies should hire orthodox social workers to work with Haredi clients in order to prevent misunderstandings and distrust. Another strategy has involved hiring well-known and accepted figures from the community to assist in building relationships based on mutual trust between the Haredi community and social workers.

Adherence to the community laws concerning modesty. Social service agencies should operate separate programs for men and women, and enforce modest dress for all personnel.

Minimization of social stigma. Recognizing social stigma as a serious barrier for service utilization, efforts have been made by Israeli social service agencies to introduce non-stigmatizing titles for intervention programs. When possible, services have been operated in different locations from social service departments.

By the time Sarah received her bachelor degree in social work, a new center for at risk Haredi children opened and she was hired to work there as a social worker.

At the center, specific strategies were introduced in order to increase cooperation with the community and to gain its trust. We made it clear that we do not want to harm Haredi clients and families, or influence their religious belief and cause them to become secular. The center was co-managed by a well-known author who is not a professional, but was widely accepted in the community; his presence opened a lot of doors for us. It is different if I call a Haredi school and present myself as a social worker, or when he calls a school and presents himself as the well-known author, there is more chance they will listen to him.

Another major change in the Haredi community was the result of the realization that culturally sensitive social work was essential for the community's success, and the awareness that secular education options for Haredi youth were lacking. In 1998, the first Haredi college opened allowing Haredi students to receive an academic degree in social work (and in a number of other fields) in a culturally-adapted educational environment. The college opened with the cooperation of leading rabbinic figures and has operated under policies that are sensitive to the needs of the Haredi community, such as separate programs at different times of the day for men and women, only accepting applicants that are married or above a certain age (twenty seven). More Haredi colleges followed and hundreds of Haredi social workers have graduated to date.

Sara worked as a social worker for a few years and then decided she wanted to advance her skills and get her master's degree in social work. This time, Haredi colleges existed but because they only offered bachelor degrees, she again asked her rabbi's blessing—this time

to study for an advanced degree at a secular university:

My rabbi gave me his blessing and this time I did not have to hide that I was studying at a university and I was even proud to tell my children about it....yet my decision to get an advanced degree was pragmatic – I needed it in order to advance my skills and get better job opportunities....

A few years after Sarah received her master's degree in social work, Haredi colleges began to offer master's programs, reflecting the community's appreciation of the social work profession.

Sarah then joined a PhD. program, driven this time by academic curiosity rather than a pragmatic need to get a better job. Sarah knew it would be extremely difficult to recruit a Haredi research population, as academic research was taboo in the community. She was looking for a topic that would not be perceived as threatening and therefore she excluded research topics which were not suitable in the Haredi context, such as sexuality and child abuse. Eventually she chose to do research on grand parenting in the Haredi community.

Epilogue: Jerusalem, 2011

Sarah, who recently received her PhD., is now at lecturer at a Haredi college, serving as a role model for Haredi women wanting to become social workers. She also works as a private clinician; her Haredi clients feel comfortable with her because she is a professional social worker.

Going through Haredi blogs and newspapers, it is now common to read positive stories about social workers, as their image within the Haredi community has changed from "child-snatchers" to "saving angels."

Sarah's advancement in her career as a social worker was ahead of the community's pace. But change is afoot in the Haredi community and we believe that many of Sarah's Haredi students also will strive for academic careers.

Looking back, I now realize that my journey towards secular education was similar to the journey of the Haredi community towards cooperation with social workers. Some similar components include the need for rabbinical approval, the anxiety regarding threats to our belief system (like exposure to Darwinism), and the concern about social stigma. Today I live in harmony with my religious beliefs and academic knowledge. I teach developmental theories that are based on Darwin, but analyze them in relation to our beliefs, and show where they go together and where they conflict.

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(Footnotes)

1 The Jewish scripture.

2 Mainly in Haredi cities.

3 Married Jewish women cover their hair as a sign of modesty.

4 In the Haredi community,, studying at a secular university is rarely permitted.

5 Refers to the process in which secular Jews return to Judaism and adopt an observant lifestyle.

6 The processes described in this article refer to the mainstream Haredi society, yet there are still subgroups who continue to reject any cooperation with social services.

7 These principles are widely accepted by social workers, yet they are not officially adopted as a policy.

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